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ABSTRACT

Although experiential activities require minimal effort and time commitment on the part of instructors to implement, such activities capture students' interest, assist them in understanding course concepts, and generate excellent class discussions. As a test of experiential teaching techniques, several personality scales were used in a social psychology class to engage students in learning about a variety of topics. Thirty-nine women and 14 men enrolled in a social psychology class volunteered to participate in the study. Early in the semester, students completed an instrument measuring demographics, self-esteem, interpersonal reactivity, self-monitoring, and locus of control. At the end of the semester, students completed a questionnaire evaluating the experiential personality scales component of the course. Results of the study indicated that the students: (1) held very positive attitudes about completing the personality scales and using them as a springboard for lecture and discussion; (2) felt that the activity was very interesting and valuable; (3) reported that the activity helped them to grasp the role of dispositional and situational factors in social behavior and understand related concepts and research presented in class; (4) indicated that the activity enabled them to relate material to their own lives; and (5) thought that the component should be included in future classes. Contains 21 references. (MAB)

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# Using Personality Scales as an Experiential Learning Activity

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**Abstract**

This paper describes and evaluates the use of personality scales (e.g. Perspective Taking Subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index [Davis, 1980]) as an experiential learning activity designed to engage students in an active learning process. I outline learning objectives, identify some specific personality scales suitable for classroom use, and discuss the applicability of this technique to a variety of courses and topical areas in psychology.

**Using Personality Scales as an Experiential Learning Activity**

Research on active versus passive learning suggests that learning is enhanced by an experiential classroom component (Wittrock, 1984). Students report being able to understand material better when experiential activities are used as a part of classroom instruction (Marshall, & Linden, 1994). Moreover, many faculty would agree that experiential activities stimulate discussion and enliven the classroom environment.

Using experiential teaching techniques also sends a valuable implicit message. According to Gray (1993), an implicit message ". . . includes attitudes about the subject under discussion, attitudes about the students, and expectations about what students will do . . ." (p. 69). One implicit message in engaging students experientially is that students can direct their own learning. Experiential activities also can encourage students to attempt to relate what they learn to their own lives.

This paper describes and evaluates a type of experiential classroom activity that can help an instructor break free of an over reliance on the lecture/note giving habit. Specifically, I will address the use of several personality scales (e.g. the Perspective Taking Subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index [Davis, 1980]) to engage students in learning about a variety of topical areas in social psychology.

I believe that using this teaching technique helps students better understand: (a) specific dispositional characteristics; (b) the situational factors that influence dispositional tendencies; (c) relevant, related research; and (d) how these dispositional and situational factors relate to "the real world" (e.g. the students' own lives). This technique allows the students to engage in self-evaluation and enables the instructor to present material in what students describe as "a more meaningful way."

## Method

Participants

Thirty-nine women and 14 men enrolled in an undergraduate social psychology class volunteered to participate. These students represented a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, they ranged in age from 17 to 47 years, $\underline{M} = 23.23$, $\underline{S} = 6.48$.

Instruments and Procedures

Early in the semester, students completed an instrument comprised of (a) 7 demographic questions, (b) the 6-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), (c) the 7-item Perspective Taking Subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980), (d) the 25-item Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974), and (e) the 24-item Locus of Control Scale (Levenson, 1973). Completing these scales took about 25 minutes of class time (alternatively, students can be asked to complete the scales at home).

Students scored each of their own completed personality scales at the beginning of a discussion of the related social-psychological topic/research (this took about five minutes for each scale). Each scale used and some of the topics discussed in conjunction with its use are listed below.

1. **Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale:** self-esteem and jealousy (Salovey & Rodin, 1991), persuasion (Janis, 1954), failure of love relationships (Rusbult, Morrow, & Johnson, 1990), group identity (Tajfel, 1982).

2. **Davis' IRI Perspective Taking Scale:** perspective taking and empathy (Batson, 1991), attitudes about others (Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977), altruistic helping (Oswald, 1992).

3. **Snyder's Self-Monitoring Scale:** self-monitoring and career choice (Brown, White, & Gerstein, 1989), leadership (Ellis, 1988), friendship (Snyder & Simpson, 1984), politics

(Simonton, 1988).

4. **Levenson's Locus of Control Scale:** locus of control and obedience (Blass, 1991), prosocial behavior (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991), stress (Shek & Cheung, 1990), health (Quadrel & Lau, 1989).

In discussing each topic, I emphasized the relative role of dispositional and situational influences on human behavior. I encouraged students to evaluate their scores on each scale, particularly in relation to the specific research discussed.

**Evaluation and Discussion**

At the end of the semester, students completed a 6-item questionnaire evaluating the experiential personality scales component of the course. They responded to the attitude statements using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Mean responses to the items indicated very positive attitudes about completing the personality scales and using them as a springboard for lecture and discussion. Students responded that the activity was very interesting ($\underline{M} = 6.64$, $\underline{S} = 0.51$) and valuable ($\underline{M} = 6.09$, $\underline{S} = 0.83$). They reported that it helped them better understand the role of dispositional and situational factors in social behavior ($\underline{M} = 6.09$, $\underline{S} = 0.83$) and the related concepts and research presented in class ($\underline{M} = 6.27$, $\underline{S} = 0.65$). Moreover, they indicated that the activity enabled them to relate the material to their own lives ($\underline{M} = 6.10$, $\underline{S} = 0.95$) and that it should be used in future classes ($\underline{M} = 6.55$, $\underline{S} = 0.52$).

Students commented informally that they especially enjoyed the personality scales component of the course because (a) it provided them with the opportunity to evaluate themselves on the various dispositional characteristics, (b) it made the research more relevant and easier to remember because they could connect it to themselves, and (c) the related class discussions were

more interesting and fun than simply taking notes.

This activity (or a modification of it) is appropriate for a variety of psychology courses including general psychology, personality, social, tests and measurement, and educational psychology. For general psychology, I recommend using fewer scales. For the personality course, using additional scales is appropriate.

This experiential activity requires minimal effort and time on the part of the instructor to implement. It captures students' interest and helps them understand the concepts and research being presented. Moreover, it generates excellent class discussions--even the most reserved students participate. As an instructor, witnessing such enthusiasm is exciting and enjoyable.

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